DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 348 CS 206 837

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TITLE Reconceptualizing Back-To-Basics.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Cognitive Processes; Cultural Differences; Curriculum; Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Political Influences; *Program Content; Remedial Instruction; Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS *Back to Basics

ABSTRACT

Noting that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what back to basics advocates really mean by "basics," this paper suggests three interpretations: one dealing with skills, one with subject matter, and one with values. The first section of the paper places each of these interpretations in historical perspective, demonstrates how each devalues cultural diversity, and illustrates the idea that curriculum in the three versions of the basics is primarily a matter of product selection, materials adoption, or the like. The second section of the paper uses the subject of remedial English to demonstrate how the skills approach to the basics especially promotes cultural ethnocentrism and the political status quo. The last section discusses one basic skills improvement program that is trying to implement a version of the basics reconceptualized as mental operations used by individuals to solve problems. (FL)

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RECONCEPTUALIZING BACK-TO-BASICS

1982 AERA CONFERENCE
SYMPOSIUM ON
"REVISIONIST CURRICULUM THOUGHT: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION"
(SESSION 39.03)

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RECONCEPTUALIZING BACK-TO-BASICS

Introduction

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what people mean when they clamor for "back-to-basics." Ben Brodinsky, in a 1977 Phi Delta Kappan article, identified twelve demands made by various back-to-basics advocates.[1] I want to suggest that three major, somewhat overlapping notions of the basics exist.

The first interpretation of back-to-basics is best represented by the phrase, "the three R's: reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." Basics here are a narrow band of skills most frequently associated with literal level understanding in reading, so-called "correct expression" in writing, and computation facility in mathematics. Cost efficiency is invariably a factor in this equation of the basics as is competency testing.[2]

A second concept of back-to-basics is subject-centered in nature. The basics--at the secondary school level--are English, mathematics, history (not social studies), science, and in some cases, foreign language (Latin and French, and not Spanish). In this plan, accumulation of data from a restricted body of academic knowledge gets equated with the basics.[3]

Many people concerned about back-to-basics are not as much enamored of subject knowledge or skills as they are of discipline and conservative values. This third common approach to the basics emphasizes hard work, diligence, perseverance, proper attire, patriotism, and uncritical respect for authority.[4]

These three versions of back-to-basics, while ostensibly distinct in their orientations, are nontheless similar in five fundamental ways. First, in each of these notions of the basics, the presumed proper relationship between school and society is utilitarian. The school exists to socialize the young into the prevailing social order and, more specifically, to prepare youth for the world of work. Secondly, the skills, subject, and values approach to back-to-basics all depict the learner to receive knowledge. Knowledge is "transmitted" to students, who do not create culture but acquire it. A third, related similarity

has to do with curriculum. Curriculum is a static product, something that teachers adopt or deliver as opposed to something they make, develop, and experience. Fourthly, the curriculum proposed by those advocating the skills, subject, or values approach is culturally ethnocentric. Finally, proponents of these various back-to-basics persuasions--and especially those espousing a skills or values approach--rarely cite historical precedent in arguing for adoption of their particular curriculum.

In this paper, I will place the skills, subject, and values interpretations of back-to-basics in historical perspective. I plan to demonstrate that each approach devalues cultural diversity. I will attempt to show that curriculum in these three respective versions of the basics is primarily a matter of product selection, materials adoption, or the like. Using the subject of remedial English as an example, I will analyze how the skills approach especially promotes cultural ethnocentrism and the political status quo. I will then discuss a Basic Skills Improvement Program in Franklin County (Columbus, Ohio) that is currently trying to implement a reconceptualized version of the basics.

Three Popular Approaches To Back-To-Basics

The 3 R's

At last count, no fewer than thirty-five states had mandated some form of minimum competency testing for their students. In most instances, the impetus for this testing has come from the general public and state legislators, who decry the decline in standardized test scores. The examinations themselves focus primarily on low-level mechanical skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Competency testing is the capstone of the 3 R's approach to back-to-basics.[5]

Enlarged classes, strict schedules of performance objectives, standardized tests, and administrative management goals proliferate among systems implementing a 3R's program of back-to-basics. While hailed as innovations, the forementioned

artifacts closely parallel the scientific management procedures which saturated the schools during the period 1910-1930.

A brief but careful look at educational history reveals that scientific management proponents Leonard Ayres, Frank Spaulding, and Frederick Taylor virtually controlled educational policy making in the early part of this century. As early as 1909, Ayres applied industrial values to the schools by contriving an index of efficiency, a pseudo-scientific measure for representing school success rate. Ayres utilized this index for evaluating school systems in fifty-eight cities, ranking them in his book, Laggards in Our Schools. Stripped of its rhetoric, the text shows Ayres' overriding concern did not extend beyond the matter of cost-per-pupil. His vision centered myopically on the expense of educating the repeater, the student whom the system failed to promote regularly from one grade level to the next. Noting the tragically overcrowded schools, Ayres nevertheless ignored the effect of such crowding on the quality of education. His data were simplistically interpreted to call for a curriculum which offered only those academic subjects necessary to prepare students for a business society and which accomplished the goal in the most mechanical and parsimonious manner. Curriculum was essentially reduced to a reading, writing, and arithmetic course of study.

Frederick Taylor amplified Ayres' approach by developing a system of scientific management, originally designed to serve mechanical engineers but later superimposed on all phases of American life, most notably education. The chief objective of the "Taylor System" was to extract the greatest productivity from human labor by eliminating poor management and by overcoming workers' innate laziness.[6] Taylor devised elaborate time and motion studies to bulwark his theory. He made significant contributions to technology, but really over-extended himself in promoting his work. In addressing the schools, he translated the "task" idea so central to his system to mandate the complete planning of a student's school day. Inelegantly, he posited that "most of us remain, through a great part of our lives, ...grown-up children

and do our best only under pressure of a task of comparatively short duration."[7] Consequently, workers and students ought to receive instruction detailing "not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it."[8]

Frank Spaulding used Taylor's system to develop his own educational cost accounting plan. Spaulding boldly introduced the concept of judging the relative value of school subjects based on a strict dollar criterion. "He didn't know, ... whether music was more valuable than Greek, but Greek was more expensive and so from a financial standpoint less valuable."[9] Spaulding's principles were enthusiastically applied to innumberable cost analysis projects. Reports criticizing class size and proposals to eliminate various "unprofitable" academic courses appeared. Spaulding sought economy as an end unto itself.

Today, "reading, writing, 'rithmetic" is trumpeted by state legislators, journalists, business leaders, and members of the general public. We consistently hear these people calling--in the name of cost efficiency--for elimination of art and music courses and electives such as women's literature, the Holocaust, black literature, contempory social problems, and so on. In fact, all courses that are not narrowly skill-centered, that do not have some direct vocational application or perceived social promotion value are labeled as "frills." Material dealing with minorities is systematically sheared away from the curriculum. A program of a minimum competency is frequently adopted. Curriculum development for all practical purposes ceases. Teachers' planning time is consumed in the construction of atomized activities in vocabulary drill, language usage, computation, and recall of textbook information. Teachers devote the majority of their instructional time to coaching students for externally prepared competency exams. Students are asked to perform an array of mechanical skills on demand.[10] 3 R's curriculum reform manifests itself in strigent textbook adoption policies and in the imposition of testable, isolated, grade-level behavioral outcomes. But rarely do you find state legislators or other 3 R's advocates citing the work of Ayers,

Taylor, or Spaulding let alone that of William Bagley and other essentialists who wrote during the 1930's and whose essentialist concept of education bears significant resemblance to that of contempory 3 R's advocates.[11]

The Subject/Disciplines Approach

There exists a long history of educational reformers and critics who have desired to restructure public school education around the study of a tightly-prescribed academic curriculum. In the 1950's for example, Arthur Bestor described a curriculum that he called "a standard academic curriculum." "It embodies the intellectual skills" Bestor wrote, "that scholars and scientists consider essential for advanced work in every field. It transmits the knowledge and develops the qualities of mind that businessmen, ... insist are essential for practical success."[12] Bestor compared his curriculum to the one then in fashion in the "best preparatory schools and the best private day schools" in America.[13] History, political science, mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, English (the classics), and foreign language constituted Bestor's curriculum. This liberal education was basic and fundamental "preparation for life," according to Bestor. He contended that "...those who accomplish the most in life, practical as well as intellectual" were products of a liberal education.[14]

Jerome Bruner did not have pretentions of this sort. Yet in the late 1950's, Bruner was also an academic disciplines-oriented individual. Although his spiral curriculum was frequently misinterpreted--its emphasis on active learning either overlooked or distorted--it nonetheless ultimately stressed a discrete set of decidedly conventional academic subject matters. Moreover, as Bruner himself later acknowledged, the spiral curriculum assumed " that everybody who came to these curricula ...already had been the beneficiary of the middle-class hidden curricula that launched them in the traditionally intellectual use of the mind."[15]

Bruner's spiral curriculum evolved from the rational structuralism. According to rational structuralism, the respective subject matter fields

contain "general ideas" (i.e., controlling concepts or advanced organizers) central to an intelligent understanding of that content. The underlying and questionable assumption at the famous 1959 Woods Hole conference was that the specialists there could define these ordering principles and also that their representation of "general ideas" were accurate, authentic, and coincident with those that might be suggested by other scholars. In any case, the various participants focused almost exclusively on content, devoting scant attention to the place of the school in the social order. Although Bruner and his associates did argue "that a curriculum ought to be built around the great issues, principles and values that a society deems worthy of the continual concern of its members,"[16] the group failed to sketch a method by which these outstanding issues and values might be identified. The whole "disciplines" movement really lacked a critical awareness of the sociology of knowledge. The danger of the spiral curriculum resided not only in its potential for producing a meritocracy, as Bruner himself now acknowledges, but in the distinct possibility that it could create a technocratic elite ignorant of the social consequences of its own action.

Back-to-basics proponents of the disciplines persuasion rarely cite Bruner and the whole disciplines movement. Bruner has requested a moratorium on the disciplines approach, recognizing its rather grave political consequences--the tendency of it to rigidify class lines--and growing increasingly sensitive to what he calls the "unrealistically airy"[17] pedagogical theory described in the process of education. In any event, Bruner's spiral curriculum is by no means the best example of a subject or disciplines approach to the basics. A better historical precedent is the Great Books Program, popular on several occasions in this century and being championed again today by Mortimer Adler.

Adler disdains school efforts to provide training for specific jobs or roles in society. In place of transmission of work-related skills Adler proposes

a classical curriculum that hinges on transmission of knowledge. The primary source for this knowledge is the so-called Great Books, a collection notably lacking in works authored by Asians, Blacks, Latin Americans, and women.

For the teacher in the Adler curriculum, didactic instruction, coaching, and Socratic discussion are prescribed pedagogies. Curriculum in Adler's model is preestablished, both in terms of what is taught and how it is taught.[18]

Adler of course differs from skills and values back-to-basics proponents in that he develops his curriculum with educational history clearly in view. The subject or academic disciplines approach to basics is usually couched within some framework of historical context. Such is not always the case, however. State legislators proposing--or mandating--liberal education approaches to the basic skills rarely invoke historical precedent.

The Values Approach

The values perception on back-to-basics is succinctly summarized by Gerald Gutek who writes that those holding this view believe that

> Public school teachers and administrators should transmit values and exhibit well-defined standards of behavior. Administrators and teachers should occupy positions of respect and use this position to assert the basic values of punctuality, hard work, respect for authority, obedience to the law, and a general affirmation of traditional American values.[19]

Adherents to this line of argumentation are ideologically conservative or even reactionary. Slogans such as "the cult of the slob"[20] are used to portray schools as irresponsible institutions turning out delinquent, morally lax individuals.

During the 1960's, California superintendent of public instruction Max Rafferty adopted this stand on the basics. Rafferty demanded that schools restore in youth a sense of discipline, perseverance, civic responsibility and patriotism. According to Rafferty, schools needed to inculcate in students

the cultural legacy of the American Revolution. Rafferty chided cultural relativists and reduced teachers' role to that of modeling patriotic behavior and transmitting predetermined, systematically-organized content.[21]

Rafferty's opinions are popular even today among a certain segment of the population. Back-to-basics advocates who carry the values banner promote standards and curriculum that deny equal access, representation, and opportunity to minorities. Rafferty himself continues to speak out, inveighing against Dewey's progressivism and the educational programs it fostered. While Rafferty evidences a sense of the past, the more typical values-oriented back-to-basics supporter lacks historical perspective.

Remedial English and the Basics

Primarily in the skills approach to back-to-basics, and to the lesser degree in the subject and values approach, uniform measures of student achievement and a standardized curriculum are touted. The learning program that inevitably results favors middle class children. Popular versions of back-to-basics magnify differences between learners of varying socio-economic backgrounds. The skills approach especially seems to foster programs of remediation, which effectively isolate students with the least amount of exposure to middle class life in so-called "developmental" classes and remedial centers.

The entire concept of remediation is a reaction to the demand for diplomas that are expected to represent measurable, independent, legislated competencies. Curriculum nationwide is being reformulated to prepare students for grade promotion and "exit" examinations. Students who fail grade promotion tests are channeled into remedial programs, a special sub-stratum of today's back-to-basics movement.

In the realm of English education and basics in written and oral communication, the existing code of Standard American English (SAE) provides a seemingly infallible

measure by which to judge student achievement. Language training for minorities in most back-to-basics programs focuses on teaching students to substitute standard for nonstandard speech forms and to eradicate dialect from their written composition. Bereiter and Englemann provocatively state the ideology which impels this teaching: "There are standards of knowledge and ability which are consistently held to be valuable in the schools, and any child in the schools who falls short of these standards by reason of his cultural background may be said to be culturally deprived."[22] Bereiter and Englemann obviously support a deficit model of education, essentially proposing that children who do not control the content of middle-class learning are either genetically defective or environmentally deprived and as a consequence cognitively disabled. This argument invidiously equates difference with deficit. The equation ignores pertinent, rudimentary findings of cultural anthropologists. Furthermore, the Bereiter/Englemann philosophy, which typifies most thinking on remedial (also called "compensatory") education, assumes that school success possesses ultimate value: "It does not matter that [the student] may have other knowledge and other skills which in other contexts might be valued more highly."[23] No sense of a misfit between the child and institution exists; rather, all inadequacy apparently resides in individuals or in their cultural ambience. Accordingly, the system must work to repair or remediate the student, while the school and its curriculum escape responsibility for change.

In contrast to Bereiter and Englemann, Basil Bernstein rejects the idea that cultural difference equals cultural deprivation. Berstein believes that an individual's social experience is valid and significant in its own right. Language is integral to that experience. Furthermore, Berstein agrues, language is a completely arbitrary, artificial set of symbols to which meaning is attached. In this respect, linguistic systems are like social institutions, "for both of them are historically evolving ways of organizing symbolic interaction among people."[24] Bernstein contends, for example, that both economic and cultural

capital are symbolic systems subject to exploitative use and also means by which people can extend their life-worlds. Natural language functions in response to particular social arrangements. School replicates those patterns and contexts familiar to middle-class children. The symbolic order predominant in educational settings--what Bernstein calls an elaborated code--is foreign to lower class individuals, who employ a restricted code of speech. Neither code is inherently more worthwhile than the other, but schools nonetheless reward only the former. Paradoxically, then, remedial education actually stigmatizes learners for what they know and assails the very images and symbolic representations essential to remedial students' knowledge of their world outside the school.

Remedy is "something that cures disease, or corrects a disorder" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1976). Remedial students in English are victims of a phenomenon know as iatrogenics, which, in the world of medicine means a doctor-inflicted illness for which the patient is faulted. Sociologically, this process is known as "blaming the victim." In schools, remedial students are set-up to be cured for something they either never possessed in the first place or control in a way that is unfamiliar to school managers and policy makers. The cycle in remedial English is a vicious, self-defeating one: students learning to write "correct" English who might make marked improvement in their expressive facility nevertheless fail continuously under the existing standard. Despite good performance, negative feedback transpires at a deeper level as the individual struggles to sustain motivation against the backdrop of failure. Emphasis in remedial writing programs focuses almost exclusively on surface features of language, even though scholars agree that language learning does not result primarily from "correct" ordering of specific language elements. Actually, what basic writers would most benefit from is practice manipulating whole pieces of discourse. That is to say that composition teachers should not obsessively correct products but instead develop those processes by which

pupils generate discourse. Genuine language learning attends to students' deep language structure. Remediation approaches learning negatively by playing upon the self-confidence of the individual student.

Writing, argues Richard Gebhardt, is a "humanizing activity" which addresses people rather than skills. Back-to-basics, and remedial centers in particular, attack this philosophy, degrading writing "to its functional boundaries, instead of seeing it as an expressive and intellectual process."[25] This all amounts to what Stanley Aronowitz calls the further "technization of American education."[26] When teachers of remedial English impose mono-stylistic norms on students, they often dismiss the content of the message conveyed.[27] Already at a disadvantage because they frequently do not control the content of middle-class life, miniority students face double jeopardy in the English classroom where the form of their verbal expression, i.e., their nonstandard mode of written discourse, is labelled inferior.

John Mellon has explained that pupils engaged in learning composition encounter endless "rehearsals" and "dummy runs." Success in school writing depends on maintaining certain pretenses because, Mellon asserts, the activities of schooling are artificial.[28] This telling comment epitomizes a mentality that even while indicting the institution for its synthetic quality leaves the very assumptions of schooling intact at the expense of all students but especially non-middle-class individuals. This cynical attitude permeates back-to-basics and remedial education thinking. The mentality at work reinforces presiding role reationships and effectively blocks efforts at changing the constitutive rules of education, rules that must be transformed if school is to become a democratic, enabling place. Language programs, instead of mandating requirements shackling students to a single standard of competence, might be directed toward valuing speech and other language differences. "...The wisest course for education would seem

to be concentration on the elaboration of language functions, letting linguistic features come out as they may."[29]

Writing coherently in various discourse modes, as an enormously complex behavior, lends itself to differentiated levels of mastery and varying interpretations of what actually constitutes standards. SAE is after all a human construct, a purely arbitrary contrivance and not a reality unto itself. The writing taught in schools is typically a literary language that is rarely used outside academia or a scientific, technical language almost impervious to ethical talk. In both instances, the institution unfortunately assumes that all learners have equal access to the cultural capital of the middle-class. This misguided assumption leads to a situation whereby schools reproduce the power of distribution within society.

In terms of oral communications, we know at least this much about speaking Standard English: because it

> "is not an intrinsic requirement for any cognitive process or educational task...decisions about whether to teach SE must be made on other grounds--on beliefs and values about the nature of the good life, the appropriate role of the school in achieving it, and the relevance for the United States in the 1970's [and beyond] of the Pygmalion effect of language on social mobility."[30]

Remedial English in the last analysis is an inappropriate solution to a problem that is poorly defined in the first place. James Sledd speaks for the reconceptualist when he says that it is important "not to abandon the native speech whose mastery made us human, and not to reject all alien strength and grace, but instead to compose a new third world of words where our heritage will not be repudiated but enriched."[31]

In summary, the position maintained here is that back-to-basics and ancillary remedial programs in English proceed from faulty and sometimes damaging assumptions. Rather than applying a medical model to treat "deficient," "culturally deprived" learners, education for basic language skills would do well to nurture language variation. Certainly, the strategy

of isolating students in remedial centers and assigning them endless grammar exercises is no answer. Conscious knowledge of grammatical rules and terminology under any circumstance will not lead to mastery of the basics because such knowledge "does not help students engage in the intellectual and emotional processes that are prerequisite to effective, mature communication."[32] Indeed, the immediate task is to develop contexts for learning--both in and out of school--that motivate students to elaborate and refine their existing language skills.

An Alternative View of Basic Skills

In the Franklin County Department of Education Basic Skills Improvement Program (BSIP) basics are conceptualized as mental operations, that is, cognitive processes that individuals use to solve problems. The basics are defined as follows:

Reading--the ability to read and think critically about printed material.

Writing--the ability to generate, select, and organize information for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Oral Communication--the ability to adapt oral messages for a range of communication purposes and to speak intelligently to a variety of intended audiences.

Math--the ability to solve everyday problems involving counting, measurement, percentage figuring, estimation, and chart and graph interpretation; the ability to reason quantitatively.

Franklin County secondary school teachers representing four school districts participate in this federally-funded basic skills across the curriculum project. The heart of the project is a series of three intensive workshops designed to acquaint teachers with basic skill definitions, program standards, and teaching techniques. To-date, teachers from seventeen different instructional areas

have completed the inservice program. Building administrators attend special workshops for the purpose of exploring ways to support their teachers' basic skill instructional efforts.

Early in the inservice program, I provide participants with two key documents: The Essentials of Education and What Do We Know About Standards for Effective Basic Skills Programs?. The first of these documents cautions against a simplistic approach to the basics, urges an interdisciplinary approach to education, and appeals for continuing community involvement in identifying and defining the basics. Eighteen prominent professional organizations have endorsed The Essentials of Education. Teachers who read it are confronted with a concept of basics that conflicts with the typical skills, disciplines, or values interpretation of basic skills. The second document, What Do We Know About Standards for Effective Basic Skills Programs?, puts forth guidelines for instruction in mathematics, oral communications, writing, and reading. The document consists of position papers compiled by the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics, the Speech Communication Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English plus an elaborate description of teacher education standards in reading as drafted by the International Reading Association.

In reviewing these papers with participants, I ask them to picture the emergent image of the learner. It is clear that the professional organizations which authored the papers collectively view the learner as an active, meaning-making organism. Learning is conceptualized as a process of bringing meaning into being by composing written words and crafting discourse, by interacting with texts, by organizing experience and formulating it into meaningful oral messages, and by reasoning quantitatively. I present to workshop participants this idea: as opposed to the skills, subject, and values approach to basics, which stress behavior (and ultimately control), the mental operations/cognitive process approach "conceives learning as action."[33] This cognitive process

approach to basic skills aspires toward "liberating" literacy as opposed to the "inert" literacy to which the more technological, behavioristic approaches to the basics ascribe.[34]

Following this preliminary exploration of the basics, the BSIP workshops unfold as follows: workshop participants are introduced to a series of issues related to learning and developing reading, writing, oral communications, and mathematical skills. Pertinent educational theory and research are reviewed. Participants then discuss potential curricular implications of the theory and research. The workshop leader demonstrates a teaching strategy and/or role plays a classroom activity that addresses the individual issue under consideration. Teachers are asked to use their classroom experience as a framework for reflecting on the activity. Teachers rarely criticize the content of the demonstrated activity. They do, however, occassionally object to its practicality because it may pose "delivery" problems, i.e., it doesn't mesh with existing teaching styles or reinforce established classroom rules and administrative routines.

The obvious next step is to allow teachers to work individually or in small subject area groups to adapt the demonstration to their own particular instructional situation. Subject area specialists help teachers in this curriculum development effort by planning with them and then later by observing teachers implement the strategy, technique, and activities they have designed. On the third day of the workshops, teams of teachers meet to do interdisciplinary planning. At this point, the focus is on designing experiential basic skill curriculum. Monthly building meetings, follow-up workshops, and a project newsletter provide teachers opportunities to share information and to appraise the effectiveness of their curriculum and instructional change efforts.

The problem of discontinuity between certain workshop activities and their implementation possibilities given present school realities does not simply dissolve. The issue of change surfaces time and time again during the BSIP workshops. We all agree that change happens slowly. "Look for small

victories," I exhort teachers. "Develop alternative ways of evaluating student work in an effort to identify inceremental growth in their achievement. Realize, too, that growth does not always occur in measurable, predictable steps but in sudden spurts. Find creative ways to evaluate formatively and let the quality of results carry you forward."

This project design is by no means unique. What makes it reconceptualist in nature are the understandings shared with teachers, the actual activity in which they are involved during workshop hours, and the overall conception of basics promulgated throughout all phases and aspects of the project.

During the workshops, teachers do a good deal of writing, critical reading, and small group problem solving. Differences in individual approaches to the assigned learning tasks are noted and analyzed. Writing an essay, for example, elicits wide variation in both approach to the task and results achieved. Yet each performance appears to have its own logic. Indeed, behind the approach is a meaning-making individual eager to articulate the reasons why a certain decision was made in the process of constructing the essay. Moreover, each product responds to purposeful comment on it. That is to say that careful reaction to the content and structure of the writer's essay often leads to meaningful re-vision (literally, to see again) and a subsequent change in the way the writer goes about putting words and paragraphs together. Messages are reformulated into more coherent pieces of discourse as a result of a dynamic shift in the writer's intellectual activity.

This way of teaching composition can be incorporated into any content area, a matter we are pursuing in the BSIP. Once experienced by teachers, it makes it difficult for them to try to teach writing by teaching grammar, rules, or formulae. It also alerts teachers to the poverty of the error-eradication method of grading. Similarily, once teachers administer cloze tests in reading[35] and listen to students--or, as in the case of the BSIP workshops, other teachers--explain why they chose the word they did (in filling in fifty blank spaces in a passage of

approximately 275 words), most teachers feel compelled to more closely align their reading assignments with student background, interest, and ability. If not that, teachers are at least motivated to institute content area reading exercises which increase students' repertoire of reading comprehension strategies. These strategies, once internalized, extend learners' overall problem solving abilities and thus effectively empower students.

Cognitive science and interactionist language theory provide the theoretical bases for the instructional strategies that are shared with teachers during the Basic Skills Improvement Program inservice. Student mastery of basic skills is seen to involve far more than mechanical response to teacher or textbook stimulus. Developing basic skill proficiency entails learning to use complex intellectual processes in increasingly decentered ways as a means to solve common human and social problems.

Both cognitive developmental and interactionist theory postulate that human growth depends on direct, meaningful experience.[36] As noted previously, BSIP teachers use one-half day of BSIP workshop time to begin developing experiential basic skill learning curriculum. (Subsequent workshops enable interested teachers to extend and complete their plans.) In order to identify opportunities for students to practice and apply their basic skills in "real life" settings, the BSIP brings in volunteers from business, industry, and social service agencies to confer with teachers. Together, the group brainstorms possibilities for practical basic skill learning. Meetings are held with parents to locate additional resources, both in terms of personnel and learning sites and situations. As a result of these efforts, BSIP teachers have created these kind of learning experiences for their students:

- an energy audit of local school buildings, where consumer math students actually conduct the audit with the local gas company engineer. Students examine boilers, windows, and building foundations, read and interpret charts and graphs, draft an audit report, and present their findings to the local school board.

- a physics unit on aviation, involving study of the economic, environmental, and social impact of airports. Students interview pilots, controllers, and airport and city planners in addition to examining principles of physics as applied to aviation.

- a home economics unit on ethnic food, immersing students in a study of different cultures. Students read cookbooks and history texts and spend time with local chefs and restaurant owners. Students interview grandparents and relatives and track down the origins of favorite ethnic dishes. The class publishes a community cookbook based on its research.

- an arts in society unit which finds students making contact with graphic designers, professional photographers, layout specialists, painters, potters, poets, actors, interior designers, and other artistic types. Students research the arts, write letters to local artists, talk with them on the phone, and in many instances spend a couple of days with a practicing artist in an attempt to learn more about that artist's work and lifestyle.

This development of experiential basic skill curriculum is the centerpiece of what I believe is a reconceptualized approach to basic skills. The activity engages teachers in bonafide curriculum development. It puts them in touch with an array of local and metropolitan resources, often exposing teachers to a vast cultural diversity they did not know existed. The curriculum development process also compels the individual classroom teacher to define precisely what the basic skills are and reveals to the educator that the conflict over basic skills literacy is at bottom a political argument over who needs to know what to achieve equality in contemporary American society.

Students who act out this experiential basic skill curriculum are likely to encounter the same cultural diversity as confronts their teachers. Students learn that they can apply basic skills to accomplish something tangible and consequential. This elaborated context for practice and application of basic skills stimulates intentional, active learning. Students collect and research information but also construct knowledge. Basic skills become part of integrated, holistic learning.

The range of interactionist and cognitive developmentally-based instructional strategies featured in the BSIP inservice and this experiential basic skill learning are mutually reinforcing. Taken in tandem, they represent a radical departure from the skills, subject, or values approach to back-to-basics.

In concluding, I would like to invoke Paul Klohr's 1974 synthesis of commonalities found in reconceptualist work.[37] Klohr notes that the reconceptualist draws on cognate fields such as sociology and anthropology. According to Klohr, the reconceptualist celebrates diversity and pluralism and views the individual as a culture creator. Reconceptualizing supporting socio-political operations is basic. Recently, historical perspective has emerged as yet another characteristic component of reconceptualist thought. My analysis of the back-to-basics movement reflects these considerations. Furthermore, the Franklin County Basic Skills Improvement Program is meant to be infused with curricular elements reflective of reconceptualist thought.

For the practicing, field-based reconceptualist, reconceptualization must operate on both the personal, philosophic and programmatic, practical levels. When the philosophic and practical fully inform one another, reconceptualist praxis will be achieved.

NOTES

1. Ben Brodinsky, "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning," Phi Delta Kappan, Volume 58, No. 7 (March, 1977), pp. 522-527

2. Thirty-five states have mandated some form of competency testing. Cost efficiency is an issue because schools are pressured to eliminate courses that do not prepare students for the competency exams. The value of a course becomes the number of students enrolled in it.

3. Mortimer Adler construes basics in this way. The classical education approach to the basics is popular among Great Books curriculum proponents.

4. Moral Majority members often support this notion of basics. The emphasis is on a return to a prescribed set of values with little interest devoted to any particular course of study. Reading, writing, and arithmetic computation skills are a second-order priority for this constituency.

5. See "Databank," page 7 in Education Week, Volume 1, No. 17 (January 19, 1982), for a graphic portrayal of the current status of competency testing.

6. For a discussion of the Taylor System, see Raymond Callahan's Education and the Cult of Efficiency (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1962).

7. Taylor, in Callahan, p. 30

8. Taylor, in Callahan, p. 31

9. Callahan, p. 64

10. Evidence indicates that the effects of this approach to education are manifested in a decline in critical thinking skills. On the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress "Response to Literature" examination, students demonstrated excellent literal level reading skills but limited competence at explicating and elaborating their thoughts. See the Report on Education Research, Volume 13, No. 24 (November 25, 1981), p. 2.

11. It is necessary to remember that essentialists such as Bagley are not purely skills-oriented. Essentialists actually straddle all three conventional approaches to the back-to-basics.

12. Ayres, Taylor, and Spaulding are to a certain extent precursors of Bestor. Yet Bestor and other 1950's spokesman such as Earl Conrad and Admiral Hyman Rickover were more concerned with the liberal education than with the technization of it. See Arthur Bestor, The Restoration of Learning (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1956), p. 51.

13. Bestor.

14. Bestor, p. 83.

15. Jerome Bruner, "The Process of Education Revisited," in Cream of the Kappan, edited by Stanley M. Elam (Bloomington, IN: PDK, 1981), p. 68.

16. Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 52.

17. Bruner, p. XIV of his preface to The Process of Education.

18. Mortimer Adler, Reforming Education: The Schooling of A People and their Education Beyond Schooling (Boulder, Colorado: Westfall Press, 1978).

19. Gerald Gutek, Basic Education: A Historical Perspective (Bloomington, IN: PDK, 1981), p. 10.

20. Gutek, citing Max Rafferty, p. 31.

21. Max Rafferty, Suffer Little Children (New York: Signet Books, 1962).

22. C. Bereiter and J. Englemann, Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Pre-Schoool (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 24.

23. Bereiter and Englemann, p. 24.

24. Michael Apple, p. 92, in Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists, edited by William Pinar (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1975).

25. Joan Baum, "The Politics of Back-to-Basics," Change, Volume 8, No. 10 (November, 1976), p. 32.

26. Stanley Aronowitz, "Mass Culture and the Eclipse of Reason: The Implications for Pedagogy," College English, Volume 38, No. 8 (April, 1977), pp. 768-774.

27. Courtney Cazden, "Dialect Differences and Bilingualism," J. Roberts and S. Akinsanya, editors, Schooling in the Cultural Context (New York: David McKay, 1976), p. 360.

28. John C. Mellon, "A Taxonomy of Compositional Competencies." Paper presented to the Minnesota Perspectives on Literacy Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota. June 16-17, 1977.

29. Cazden, in Roberts and Akinsanya, p. 364.

30. Cazden, in Roberts and Akinsanya, p. 367.

31. James Sledd, "Language Differences and Literary Values: Divigations from a Theme," College English, Volume 38, No. 3 (November, 1976), p. 237.

32. Lee Odell, "Basics: A Re-Definition," Arizona English Bulletin, Volume 18, No. 2 (February, 1976), p. 50.

33. Maxine Green, "Literacy for What?" Phi Delta Kappan, Volume 63, No. 5 (January, 1982), p. 327.

34. See Patricia Albjerg Graham on Lawrence Cremin in "Literacy: A Goal for Secondary Schools," Daedalus, Volume 110, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 131.

35. The cloze technique is based on the psychological principal of closure. Wilson Taylor developed this reading dignostic strategy about thirty years ago. To administer the cloze procedure, the teacher selects a representative 275 word passage from the printed material students will study. The first and last sentences are left intact. The fifth word in the second sentence and every subsequent fifth word are deleted. Student scores indicate the likelihood of pupils ability to comprehend the designated printed material.

36 For an excellent introductory overview of cognitive developmental theory, see Lawrence Kohlberg and Rochelle Mayer, "Development as the Aim of Education," Harvard Educational Review, Volume 42, No. 4 (November, 1972), pp. 449-496.
A seminal work in interactionist language theory is Lev Vygotsky's Mind in Society (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Also see Vygotsky's Thought and Language (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1962).

37. Paul Klohr, "Curriculum Theory: The State of the Field." Paper presented at Xavier University Curriculum Theory Conference, Cincinnati, OH. October, 1974.